



The Foster Care Connection to Human Trafficking

Foster care experience consistently ranks among the leading risk factors for human trafficking.ⁱ Children who encounter the child protection system (CPS) endure the compounding trauma of caregiver maltreatment, family instability, frequent home changes, and often repeat abuse—driving a high susceptibility to exploitation. With this knowledge, however, comes an opportunity to build a stronger, child-centered foster care system that both prevents and effectively responds to this pervasive victimization of America’s already underserved children.

Human Trafficking and the Compounding Vulnerabilities of Foster Care

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC)—the buying and selling of children for a sexual act—is a form of sexual abuse often difficult to identify. Yet, continuously expanding research reinforces the tragic link between child maltreatment, foster care, and trafficking, largely resulting from the disproportionate rate at which children in care suffer from multiple, compounding risk factors to exploitation.ⁱⁱ

Child trafficking victims suffer a continuum of abuse, frequently starting in the home.ⁱⁱⁱ

Child sexual abuse is strongly associated with CSEC. Of note, family members can both sexually abuse and facilitate the selling of a child, precipitating foster care entry.

- Of 2020 known Human Trafficking Hotline victims, one-third were exploited by family members—a 47% increase from the previous year and particularly pronounced for child victims.^{iv}
- Up to 70% of teenage CSEC victims were sexually abused as children.^v Girls are 2.5 times and boys 8.2 times more likely to be sex trafficked if sexually abused.^{vi}

Between 60-75% of child human trafficking victims were in foster care. Similarly, up to 85% had broader CPS experience.^{vii}

- Living in a group home poses particular danger, with one service provider finding that nearly every girl in a group home had been approached by a pimp.^{viii}
- A majority of adult sex trafficking victims suffered childhood abuse and were first trafficking in childhood.^{ix}

Running from home and homelessness is a predominant pathway to human trafficking.

Up to half of youth in foster care run from care at least once, and of these runaway youth, one in five will become CSEC victims.^x

- Similarly, unstable living situations and homelessness increase trafficking risks. Over 40% of the homeless youth were CSEC victims of sex trafficking.^{xi}

Numerous struggles born from the trauma of early abuse and instability exacerbates additional risk factors for system-involved youth.

These include substance misuse, dropping out of school, mental health and medical disorders, poverty, and involvement in the criminal justice system. These collateral consequences erect barriers for help and attract traffickers.

The Path Forward

Nearly one-quarter of known Pennsylvania victims in 2020 were minors.^{xii} Many children remain unaware they have been trafficked or cannot articulate what has happened—harming efforts to provide proper services let alone prosecute their exploiters. Given the risk of foster care-involved youth to trafficking, child safety system has a crucial role to play in protecting children.

Identifying child trafficking and offering adequate responses and services. Over one-third of CPS agencies listed insufficient services and failure to identify victims as the two biggest challenges to helping child victims.^{xiii}

- States must implement strategies to improve officials' ability to recognize child trafficking during police interactions and CPS investigations of abuse and neglect reports, and subsequently offer specialized treatment, not delinquency punishment.^{xiv}

Improve placement stability and guarantee a home. An increase in foster care placements increases the risk factors outlined above,^{xv} and a shortage of safe foster and treatment homes is one factor driving instability. Not only does just one foster home exist for every two children in care,^{xvi} but over 30% of agencies lack safe placement options for rescued trafficking victims.^{xvii}

- Efforts to recruit foster families and reduce shifting between homes will promote stability and minimize trafficking dangers.

Educate children in care about trafficking signs and dangers. Too often, family instability means children in care are not taught about online and in-person safety.

- The state must provide crucial education and information—particularly on the dangers of running from care—to help prevent exploitation.

Establish state protocols for immediate reporting of missing children to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and law enforcement. CSEC victims with CPS experience were 10 times as likely to have run away from care^{xviii}—and without families to lead the search, few children have anyone immediately, ceaselessly leading their search.

- States must institute clear protocols to report and search for the nearly 20,000 children missing from their care.^{xix}
- Similarly, providing free state IDs for children in care will reduce one of the largest barriers to recovery—a clear photograph to aid law enforcement search efforts.^{xx}

ⁱ "Human Trafficking Trends in 2020," Polaris Project (2022), <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Human-Trafficking-Trends-in-2020-by-Polaris.p>.

ⁱⁱ "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons," United Nations (2020), https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP_2020_15jan_web.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: What Do We Know and What Do We Do About It?" U.S. Department of Justice, (2007), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/215733.pdf>.

^{iv} "Human Trafficking Trends in 2020."

^v "Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States," National Academy of Sciences (2013), <https://ojdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/pubs/243838.pdf#page=58>; "Commercial Sexual Exploitation of children in the U.S., Canada and Mexico," University of Pennsylvania (2001), https://abolitionismom.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Complete_CSEC_0estes-weiner.pdf.

^{vi} "Human Trafficking of Minors and Childhood Adversity in Florida," American Journal of Public Health (2017), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5227932/>.

^{vii} "Human Trafficking Prevalence and Child Welfare Risk Factors Among Homeless Youth," Field Center for Children's Policy (2018), <https://fieldcenteratpenn.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/6230-R10-Field-Center-Full-Report-Web.pdf>; "Addressing Child Sex Trafficking from a Child Welfare Perspective," Casey Family Programs (2014), <http://www.casey.org/media/child-sex-trafficking.pdf>.

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- xii "Pennsylvania State Report for 2020," National Human Trafficking Hotline (2021), <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/Pennsylvania%20State%20Report%20For%202020.pdf>.
- xiii [Addressing child sex trafficking from a child welfare perspective](#). Casey Family Programs. (2014).
- xiv "Sex Trafficking of Children in the United States: Overview and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service (2015), <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R41878.pdf>.
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- xvii "Addressing Child Sex Trafficking from a Child Welfare Perspective"; "Sex Trafficking of Children in the United States: Overview and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service (2015), <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R41878.pdf>.
- xviii "Human Trafficking and The Child Welfare Population in Florida," Children and Youth Services Review (2018), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740917310216/>.
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